

Bush, Kerry virtually tied for Catholic vote: Kerry leads among Hispanics

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President Bush and his presumed Democratic challenger, Senator John Kerry, are in a virtual dead heat among American Catholic voters, according to a poll released in mid-April by Georgetown University. The survey of 1,001 Catholics found that Kerry drew support from 46 percent, Bush 41 percent. With the poll's 3 percentage-point margin of error, the two candidates are virtually tied.

Kerry, a Massachusetts Democrat who is the first Catholic to be nominated for the presidency by a major party since John F. Kennedy in 1960, holds a slight lead—40 percent to 33 percent—among the 22 percent of Catholic voters who say they are independents. Fewer than 10 percent of Catholic voters said they were undecided.

Pollsters said Kerry is drawing strong support from members of his own church, but added that it does not seem enough to lure Catholics away from the Republican fold. Thirty-nine percent of Catholics in the poll released April 12 said they were Democrats, and 31 percent Republicans.

"The 'Catholic vote' in 2004 seems less about religion and more about party identification," said Mark Gray, a researcher at Georgetown's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. Gray noted that Kerry's support among Catholics is far lower than the 72 percent of Catholics in 1960 who indicated they would vote for Kennedy. Still, "Kennedy did not have to deal with the issues of abortion, stem cell research or same-sex marriage that are important in the current campaigns and important issues for the Catholic Church," Gray said.

Catholics make up about one-quarter of all U.S. voters and are considered a crucial "swing vote" in presidential elections. In 2000, Democrat Al Gore had a slight edge—49 percent to 47 percent—over Bush among Catholic voters.

Gray said neither Kerry nor Bush, a Methodist, fully reflect Catholic teaching on a host of social issues, and it is not realistic to fault Kerry for not totally embodying

church teachings in his platform. “Kerry’s stance regarding the war in Iraq, the death penalty, and a whole variety of social justice issues regarding health care, the economy and social welfare are arguably in greater agreement with church teachings” than Bush’s, Gray said. “There are too many issues that cut across both parties to make it possible to ‘vote Catholic’ even when one of the candidates is Catholic.”

Among likely voters, Kerry leads among Hispanics, Catholic strongholds in the Northeast and Midwest, women, infrequent churchgoers and Catholics born since 1960. Bush leads among regular churchgoers, seniors and people in the South. They are virtually tied among men, baby boomers and whites. *-Religion News Service*